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Can mimetics, a theatre based practice, open possibilities for young people with learning disabilities – a capability approach?

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Abstract

Whilst the significance of the social model of disability for articulating inclusive approaches in education is recognised, the application of capability theory to education is less developed. We consider how a particular theatre based practice, here described as ‘mimetics’, can alter and extend the aspirations and achievements of children and young people with learning disabilities, and might be understood as applied capability theory or ‘capability practice’.

Mimetics has been crafted from experimental psycho-physical actor-training processes by Open Theatre Company working in collaboration with actors with learning disabilities, and adapted to support the learning and development of young people with learning disabilities.

We draw upon an action research project set up by Creative Partnerships with Open Theatre Company and a special school, where children demonstrated increased motivation and capacity for communication and socialisation, improved well-being, learning and wider achievement. To illustrate the process we offer the case of one child with an autistic spectrum disorder.

Keywords

Non-verbal communication; learning disability, drama, special education, capability approach

INTRODUCTION

Mimetics, the practice key to this article, is a theatre-based process used with children with learning disabilities. Rooted in community theatre, it was first crafted through years of drama play and theatre making with actors with a learning disability. It has further been shaped through adaptation for children with disabilities in special education learning settings. Mimetics draws upon psycho-physical actor training processes which engage children emotionally and imaginatively through physicality, drawing upon their personal interpretations, feelings and ideas. The process is communal and all interpretations feed others and shape the collective experience.

In this article we ask how mimetics might constitute a capability practice: an approach for engaging young people with learning disabilities with each other as capable equals. To do so we first investigated the impact of mimetics in developing children with learning disabilities over a number of years, using markers of development through creative learning. Then we conducted further study of the practice and several more detailed case studies of individuals.

We begin by positioning capability theory as useful to educators of children with learning disabilities, with a focus on autism, and then continue with a detailed examination of mimetics as a theatre based practice. We then outline our study, its combined methodology and its results to date, using both longitudinal data and a single child case study as evidence. The pseudonym Robert is used to define the child in this study.

Applying the social model; enabling capability?

Jean Gross (2002) advances a view of all children as in need of individual consideration. She recommends strategies which not only include the child identified as having a learning disability but every child because every child is different. Her realisation of the 'social model' of disability draws attention to the unwitting ways in which school systems, their environments and adult behaviours disable learners from feeling and being their most capable. Her recommendations for listening, looking and enabling learning are successful because rather than seeking normative behaviour and thus to compensate for difference and disability, they are predicated upon 'the centrality of diversity' which 'provides an egalitarian framework' (Sen in Terzi 2005 p.208). Gross expects and values diverse responses and needs. She does not make assumptions for any child about their comfort and confidence with any human interaction or learning situation but dialogues or interacts with them to enable them to communicate their feelings and attitudes. This lived social model mobilises a capability approach (Nussbaum and Sen 1993; Terzi 2005). Gross's strategies are designed for children in mainstream schools and our focus is those in special schools 'with identifiable disabilities and impairments' (OECD 2007), the principles are still true.

Open Theatre Director Richard Hayhow, asks not to know anything about the children he will meet unless there is an absolute medical necessity. He seeks to learn about the children as individuals through his theatre-based practice and contends that diagnoses will interfere with the sense of possibility that an interaction with a child might communicate. Gross and Hayhow's practices thus challenge a medical or 'deficit' view (Peterson and Hittie 2010). Through interactive approaches they 'open the way to considerations of impairment and disability as multidimensional and relational' and thus promote 'a conception of disability as one aspect of human diversity, comparable to age and gender'. (Terzi 2005 p.208) Their practices work against historic notions of normality, abnormality, and diversity. They recognise that 'an inclusive education system promotes children's interests in developing capabilities' (Ibid p.220) and that at the heart of inclusivity is interaction with others where the communal context generates supportive questioning, curiosity or challenge as a positive environment for developing learning and other capabilities.

However in our experience, Gross and Hayhow are not yet typical. Adults working with young people with learning disabilities can find it hard to resist seeing the child through the lens of their diagnosis, despite a readiness to celebrate positive attributes. Indeed they are trained to attend to medical diagnoses in order to develop an appropriate personal development plan and respond to need. What is understood of the condition may inform, but does not need to shape the opportunities planned for an individual. But often unwittingly, knowing can allow us to explain away a behaviour, to reduce the instinct to be curious and consider the possibility that such a behaviour might otherwise suggest. A child who covers his ears at the sound of music, may well be experiencing sensory overload, but if the response is to remove the music, the stimulus it offers is likewise removed and the potential for learning and development, as a result is lost - by both the individual and those around. But where the individual's freedoms and interests are enabled, curiosity remains alive, freedom is encouraged to pursue multiple possibilities and children's capabilities can grow and be recognised.

Capability and autism

Terzi (2005) has usefully proposed how capability theory can inform how we consider children commonly recognised to have a learning disability like autism. Following Nussbaum (2000, p.82 cited in Terzi 2005 p.211), we agree that schools and society cannot make all young people 'free of autism'. But through policies and actions they can increase understanding, influence the acceptance of differences, invite ways of connecting and communicating with young people with autism so that the different ways of being and doing by such children become part of the repertoire of wider human communication. Through policy and actions schools and society can refuse the label of autism and ask instead what a person might be and do, taking account of impairment or disability as an aspect of the natural diversity of humanity.

In recent decades the frame for approaching learning disability has become provision for identified 'needs' where needs are either a 'significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of children of the same age' or 'a disability' which generates difficulty of access, (Special Education Needs Code of Practice, 2001 p.91). Children with learning disability are assessed across a combination of dimensions (communication, cognition, social and physical). The different and deficit language of Kanner's first definition of 'extreme autistic aloneness' as 'an inability to relate themselves *in the ordinary way* to people and situations' (1943 p.242), 'extreme obsessiveness, stereotypy, echolaliaanxiously and intensely impervious to people' (Ibid p.249 – my italics) is no longer commonplace, and diverse needs are expected. But assessment through an individual account of observed behaviour tends to relate to normative descriptions and is informed by accounts of autism still in currency (Frith 2003, Westwood 2011).

Behaviour modification programmes such as the Lovaas system, are considered to have 'produced the best results' in altering autistic behaviours (Westwood 2011 p.25), although some critics have noted the limited development of learned behaviours into independent social interaction (Koegel, Russo, Rincover 1977). Certainly in a more recent study, the notion of relevance and intrinsic motivation is noted as significant to

such interventions (Rogers and Vismara 2008). ‘Intensive Interaction’, which may address this challenge, bears the closest relation to mimetics, being

‘characterised by regular, frequent interactions between the practitioner and learner, in which there is no focus on the task or outcome, but in which the primary concern is the quality of the interaction itself’. (Nind 1999 p.97)

Mimetics differs here in focussing upon physically based non-verbal communication through imagined and communal interaction as we develop below. Both invite and rely upon individuality and diversity to develop a dialogue.

With the wide range of profiles and degrees of autism which relate to a wide range of researched approaches, it is unsurprising that multi-dimensional approaches are often adopted incorporating strategies from psychoanalytic, medical, educational, and behavioural perspectives (Heflin and Simpson 1998). They recognise that a complex web of factors shape how individuals relate to and communicate with others.

What is mimetics?

Mimetics practice is an interactive communication process based on copying and imitation. This is best evidenced in the non-verbal dialogue which develops between a practitioner and a child as a result of sustained relationship using mimetics. The term mimetics defines imitation as a live, communicative and dynamic process of imaginative and dialogic interpretation of reality. The notion of imitation as an interpreted representation, is not new. But our sense owes more to Wulf and Gebauer who argue that the mimetic process which originated in oral cultures is reliant upon reciprocity, where actions ‘incorporate the whole body of the speaker and the participation of his audience’ (1995 p.316). ‘In mimetic processes, one does not become like the other, but one needs the other in order to be able to develop in relation to the other.’ (Wulf 2012).

The significance of mimetics as we propose, for capability theory, is that whilst it appears as a commonly understood copying process, it invites and requires diverse and personal interpretations which, in feeding the collective and shaping the common experience, promote and platform individual capabilities.

Mimetics and theatre

Our mimetics practice draws upon the work of a range of European theatre practitioners who have experimented with training actors through ‘psychological’ and ‘sociological’ processes. It is rooted in the work of Stanislavski and Meyerhold (Hodge 2010) which has provided a continuous source of investigation for all actor training practitioners.

Like many community theatre practitioners since Boal (1979) and Freire (1996), Hayhow's work places an 'emphasis on personal and /or local stories' and ensures that participants also shape the development of material and form and in this way have 'substantial input [to the creative process]' (Van Erven 2001 p.2).

In developing the Shyster Theatre Company, a group of learning disabled actors, Hayhow has drawn upon experimental psycho-physical theatre for its ability, through physical actions, to engage theatrically untrained individuals in expressing ideas and feelings in ways individual to them and used this to define and create work. Once the body is liberated its physical actions stimulate emotions and imagination. Imagination is important for exploring different possible dimensions, for giving freedoms that grow capabilities. It is also, according to Claxton et al, 'an amplifier of learning' (2010 p.5) and is most effective if done 'from the inside' (ibid p.32), where physical and emotional aspects feed the processing of the imagined event. In addition, the significance of accessing the imagination of a child with learning disabilities is that their world view becomes more accessible and useful to them and to others. As Karafistan comments on the Shyster actors.

'Their disabilities actively inform their creativity and take [the work] to another level' (2004 p.265).

The combination of psychological and sociological impetuses together point to the authentic individual and communal dimensions and purposes that characterise this kind of theatre. It is through the communal experience that the individual is supported and enabled to explore themselves. Schechner describes this as 'restored behaviour'

'in personal terms, [it] is "me behaving as if I am someone else" or "as if I am beside myself," or "not myself," as when in trance. But this "someone else" may also be "me in another state of feeling/being," as if there were multiple "me's" in each person.' (1985 p.37)

This notion is how performance 'activates alternatives' (Ibid p.6) and is at the heart of how drama is effective in learning and living contexts to improve self awareness, empathy, understanding and togetherness (Neelands 2009). The person, like the actor in rehearsal is sensing what it is like to be in another's shoes; they are exploring other versions of themselves using instinct and body, never truly losing themselves. The significance for the child with a learning disability, is that the sense of 'me in another state of being / feeling' awakens awareness of what more they are capable of.

Hayhow has drawn heavily upon *clowning* to develop the practice of mimetics with young people with learning disabilities. This involves seeking the state of the clown (De Castro 2010), where a person is able to be entirely present in the moment, truthful, vulnerable, open to failure, taking risks, able to express emotions and to extend their range of play (Simon 2009). The emphasis is on the communal, enabling increased awareness of self and others through playful 'clowning' behaviour, fostered the idea of mimetics as involving of playing, pretending and performing (see below).

The terms echo the language of Schechner (2006), but borrow also from Barker (1987).

The use of theatre, and particularly actor training processes, for purposes other than the stage is well known, whether in schools, health settings, business, law or society (Pendergast and Saxton 2010). Less documented is the use of actor training as an ongoing process to develop human creative potential. But it is not without precedent. Many actors have described actor training processes which are open rather than determined; which they can own and which develop them in new, unexpected ways, albeit as a by-product of the work. Chaikin (cited in Hodge) spoke of

‘Each role, each work, each performance changes us as persons... as the actor advances through the progress of the work, the person is transformed. Through the working process which he himself guides, the actor recreates himself. (Hodge 2010 p.164)

This possibility of transformation through the experience of playing a role, of exploring multiple roles, is also significant in mimetics. As Chaikin states, the relationship of role to self is always a dynamic and, if a person is open to its potential to stimulate growth and change, the collective setting of performance provides a context for a dynamic process of self recreation. Mimetics may therefore provide a context and means for such transformations which is open to all of us.

How does mimetics operate?

The range of physically based, non-verbal communications that mimetics encompasses emphasises imitative play. It takes place in a circle where everyone can see each other. Exaggerated copying stimulates a response, a connection, a dialogue with fellows. The physicality of imitative play does not need translation into words as it is communication in its own right. The practitioner gestures whilst making eye contact with all those in the room and through the gesture implicitly requests a response. The response is often a mirroring of that gesture but can equally validly be a different gesture. Ultimately what is important is not the copying but a response through the body of some kind. Hayhow talks of ‘internalising’ the copied action to attune himself to a child, and although beyond the scope of this article, this point is echoed by mirror neuron theorists who suggest that

‘Mimicking others is not just a means of communicating non-verbally; it helps us to perceive each others’ expressions (and therefore their emotions).’ (Iacobini 2008 p. 111)

The significance for such playful, follow-my leader type copying is profound for children with learning disabilities. Children with autism for example are often separated from interaction because they operate in ‘parallel worlds’ (Bogdashina 2010) so their opportunity to practice the skill of reading others’ emotions and motivations is reduced. Through ‘practising imitation’ they can become ‘good at recognising emotions ...sharing ... as members of society’.

(Rizzolatti et al 2007 p. xvi)

Scientific and educational research into the significance of the relationship between physical movement and learning reinforces the significance of the physicality of play. Whilst kinaesthetic intelligence has been recognised for some time (Gardner 1993), Claxton, Lucas and Webster suggest that it is not just a possible personal preference, but a universal and necessary aspect of the development and application of thought which happens in the body and sub-conscious.

‘Physical gesturing and gesticulating have been shown to be important components of thinking and talking: not mere ornamental accessories, but significantly embroiled in the thinking process itself.’ (2010 p.6)

Understanding mimetics through theatre: ‘playing, pretending and performing’

The notions of play, pretence and performance have helped numerous adults to understand mimetics and the learning it can affect. The three modes are distinct and whilst playing is the starting point for the work, their use is not hierarchical and all three are interrelated.

Although they are theatrical terms they are best understood in this context as heightened forms of everyday human activity. Playing is what we all do as children, pretending is in essence at the heart of empathy – imagining what it is like to be in someone else’s shoes, and performing is being conscious of being witnessed doing something in front of another. Mimetics takes these everyday terms, emphasises the centrality of social interaction (for everything happens in the context of the group) and offers children opportunity and freedom to test, shape and develop their capabilities.

So in mimetics:

playing is happening when a child

- creates in ‘languages’ beyond verbal
- creates dialogue, interaction and communication with others with these languages
- explores imaginatively the possibilities of what to do with the real, concrete and present
- develops and enjoys a sequence of activities (first steps of narrative)

Pretending happens when a child

- creates involvement, engagement and connection with ‘other realities’ using the non-verbal languages: *e.g. pretending to be another person*
- explores imaginatively the possibilities of what to do with the ‘unreal’
- creates connections and dialogue with others in these imaginary worlds
- extends a sequences of activities through exploring possibilities

Performing happens when a child

- develops awareness and acceptance that others are watching/witnessing him as he pretends
- develops understanding that he is communicating through his pretence to others
- is able to repeat his pretending
- is able to enact a consciously agreed narrative – a sequence of actions

These three terms helped Special school staff see how mimetics help children, like Robert, the single child case study of this paper, to achieve cognitive, communicative and other targets. Physical play and pretence enabled him to build better relationships with other children and to empathise with them. Exploring, inventing and dialoguing non-verbally channelled his energies into valued communications, recognised by children and adults alike.

The role of the practitioner in mimetics

It is rare that a child will initially willingly copy an action without encouragement from the practitioner. The practitioner takes the first step: maybe to copy the child to initiate the possibility of exploratory communication. Once established however a more important role for the practitioner develops: – to question, to open possibilities, and to challenge.

The practitioner is responsible for setting up the correct climate in which this challenge can take place, by modelling behaviour which is joyful, expectant, engaged, safe, positive, free from fear and anger, exciting and loving. In mimetics, as in Intensive Interaction the practitioner ‘makes careful use of watching, waiting and timing. This may involve joining in with the rhythms of the learner’s behaviour or using bursts of activity interspersed with dramatically timed pauses’. (Nind 1999 p. 97). The practitioner works within an imagined context and with the plasticity of theatre and thus operates obliquely (Kay 2010) starting with instinctive decisions and actions to build towards an unarticulated ‘higher order objective’ (ibid) in a process of experiment and discovery. So if the ‘high level objective’ for us is the ‘self-actualising’ (Maslow 1943) of the individual child, the practitioner’s focus is not on self-actualising, but on using mimetics to sense and channel the energy of all the individuals in the room to shape a ‘self-actualising’ process for the individuals involved.

METHODOLOGY

This is a combined methods study. It draws on a five year project funded by Creative Partnerships (2012) 2006-2011. The programme evaluation framework recorded degree and evidence of creative learning development through changed behaviour habits, development of skills and understanding. Several case studies of children were conducted, but one only is shared here.

Participant sample

The selection of children and adults involved in the programme altered over the course of the study. The first three years of the study involved children aged 7 – 10, with moderate learning disabilities attending a special school for 3-11 year olds. In year four the school amalgamated with a school for children aged 3 – 11 with profound learning disabilities, so that in years four and five pupils involved in the study had a broad range of learning disabilities. The age range altered over the years of the study spanning ages 3 – 11 by year five.

The amalgamated broad spectrum school moved into a new school site for all pupils at the end of the fourth year of the study. During this year some children with profound learning difficulties were involved in the study. In the fifth year all children were involved. In years four and five staff were involved in professional development in mimetics.

In the final year three children were identified for case study to look more closely at how mimetics was generating change and how the data gathering process might be more pupil owned and celebrate the growth of new capabilities. The three children were identified as describing the range of population: one child with profound and multiple learning needs, one with a physical and learning disability and one with autism. Due to this paper's focus on autism, we refer to just one of these case studies: of a child with autism, named here as Robert.

Measures

Perceived change in relation to aspects of creative learning as a result of the experience of mimetics was recorded from teachers, using a 4 point Lickert scale, noting evidence and comments alongside ratings. For the first two years all aspects were scored, but from years three to five of the study teachers chose the three aspects they most wished to develop. The aspects were defined by Cutler (2006) after Cropley (2001). This was refined in 2008 following alignment with QCA's definition of creativity (2005) echoed in Ofsted (2010).

A range of other tools was used with children to inform teacher and external evaluator data gathering, including discussions, emotion icons, creation of personal profile books for which children selected photos and words in line with recommendations by Lewis (2004) that researchers work 'with' young people with learning disabilities.

During year five, a 'significant moments' proforma was developed following Flanagan's notion of 'critical incidents'. Our 'what happened / when / who was involved' echoed Flanagan's 'situations observed'. Our 'learning taking place, why it happened and why it is significant' likewise relates to Flanagan's 'relevance to' and 'effect on the general aim' (1954 p.339). Significant moments formed some of the case study data gathered.

Procedure

Interventions led by Open Theatre occurred almost weekly for most classes throughout the five years of the study. As the programme expanded in years four and five of the study, fellow artists in mimetics were coached and involved to offer increased capacity. Evaluations were completed at least twice yearly. They were recorded at an interview conducted by an evaluator external who worked with the school over the five years of the project, reviewed and signed by teachers involved.

At a professional development session at the start of year five of the study, all staff were introduced to the 'significant moments' proforma and invited to note 'significant moments' for any child within or outside of a Open Theatre session.

Case study data were gathered through regular photographing and filming in mimetics sessions, observation notes and discussion with pupils conducted by teachers, recorded in personal profile books.

By the final year data of data collection, the new school had established a three-target framework: cognitive, communication, and other (typically physical, emotional or social development) targets reviewed termly by staff and documented visually with pupils. Children are observed for the first few weeks after arrival as they settle, learn and engage with pupils and staff. During this time parents, educational psychologist, previous school staff and the child are consulted as part of a review by staff involved with the child, to share insights and consider current abilities. Following this and using common P-levels and the school's own markers, as a starting point an individual plan is developed and shared with the child. This is reviewed again later into the term, refined with parents, the child and shared with all involved.

RESULTS

Data

The number of children, the age range of children involved and the number of staff involved (table i) increased over the study. The increase in staff between years two and three of the study reflects increased level of interest. To improve manageability of data in year four, a smaller number of staff were involved - as leads. In year five however the numbers increased dramatically in response to the inclusive invitation of all staff in 'significant moment' collection and being in the new broad spectrum school together on one school site for the first time. All staff engaged in professional development and mimetics sessions, but the data was gathered by year leads on behalf of teacher teams and recorded by the external evaluator.

Table i Number and age of children / staff involved

YEAR	Number of children involved	Number of staff involved	Age range of children
One	25	2	7-9

Two	29	3	8-10
Three	57	16	6-10
Four	70	8	8-11
Five	112	55	3-11

Throughout the study the school identified development areas for learners, from eight possible aspects, as proposed by Cutler, (2006), plus ‘reflection’ from year 3 onwards. For years three to five of the study, they selected three focal aspects. Whilst most aspects were recorded in the first years of the study, we have included here only aspects which were sustained (over three or more years).

Table (ii) records teachers’ views of degree of change in particular learning behaviours or skills. The most change possible is 4 and the least is 1.

Table ii Degree of change in children through mimetics

Learning behaviour / skill	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5
Problem solving	3.5	3	4	4	-
Thinking in new ways, new ideas	4	3	-	-	4
Engagement	4	4	-	4	4
Risk taking	3	4	4	4	4
Reflecting on learning	-	-	4	4	3

Taking risks, solving problems, being engaged and thinking in new / imaginative ways and reflection, were selected by the school as most significant in developing children’s learning. They were rated as significantly altered through mimetics. In the first year of the project the teachers said

‘A: They were so insular. Now they play together. Children who would not before have made eye contact look at each other.

B: I didn’t know them before this year. They sat, listened, accepted. Now they argue with me, debate, converse. They talk and think!

A: I never thought I’d see so much empathy.

C: They notice and are drawn towards each other now...they understand a little more about relationships with one another’.

Whilst staff change is not reported in this article, interviews revealed that mimetics effected change in adult thinking and behaviour also

‘[Before some of our teaching was limiting children... We are just now acknowledging the fact that [children] learn in different ways. We have kicked labels out. We are talking about learning in different ways, with more depth, more individuality.’ (Teacher B)

Case Study

‘Robert’ was transferred to Fortforest Broad spectrum school from a mainstream primary school where his progress in learning, isolation from others and repetitive behaviours were making him increasingly unhappy and mainstream provision less appropriate. He was diagnosed as being on the autistic spectrum, a common development disorder with many of the children in this study.

When Robert, joined the school in year three of the study, he exhibited many of the characteristics of autism to a moderate degree: ‘impaired social interactions and lack of normal emotional relationships with others; impairment of communication; reduced ability to learn, particularly through incidental observation and imitation; stereotype behaviour patterns (e.g. rocking, hand flapping); obsessive interests, ritualized activities; lack of imaginative and creative play’ (Farrell 2008). During the observation period soon after this arrival staff noticed that Robert had certain preferred schema such as manipulating buttons. He could often be seen rocking from foot to foot. He also typically withdrew from other children preferring to be alone and frequently became very loud, angry or upset. Possibly he was experiencing a sense of threat or fear, causing what Goleman calls ‘a neural hi-jacking’ (1996 p.14) by the limbic part of the brain which closes down the upper parts of the brain and leaving the reptilian brain to lead. With adrenalin coursing through his body, his instinct for fight or flight is heightened, causing loud behaviour.

His action plan for year 5 - under termly review - involved three connected targets which recognise the relationship between emotion, physicality and cognitive readiness to communicate and learn:

- Cognition: to know how to identify and regulate his emotions across curriculum.
- Communication: to develop a playful relationship with another child
- Physical: to exercise every day to develop his core, gross and fine muscles especially his cross lateral muscles.

Just over two years after starting mimetics practice Robert easily achieved all of his cognitive, communication and other targets and typically sustained them naturally beyond sessions, so that his parents and other teachers commented on the changes. Robert selected images of himself involved in soft play with two other children. With one he was gentle as if recognising her more limited movement repertoire and robustness, with another stronger boy his play was more physical. Such changes were marked by ‘significant moments’ such as when Robert stopped the entrenched behaviour pattern of refusing invitations and made a choice to enter the space and pretend. Robert’s teachers no longer see the autistic behaviours described earlier (Farrell 2008) as he interacts socially, engages emotionally with others, communicates well, is learning well, drawing upon modelled and observed behaviour. Any behaviour patterns he has such as rocking are a sign of his energy and excitement – an individual thing. Likewise his ritualised activities have diminished and instead his imaginative and creative play is highly developed. Robert has since moved on to the secondary school where through his continued engagement with mimetics he is becoming a leader amongst peers.

Conclusions

Mimetics appears to have significant value for children with learning disabilities. As our results show (see table iii), a significant change was recorded in children’s level of engagement with each other and with learning, in problem-solving, taking risks, thinking in new and imaginative ways as well as in children’s readiness to reflect on their behaviour and progress in learning. These scores are supported by interview comments, a sample of which is included in ‘Results’. They could also have been evidenced through photographs and film evidence as well as through parental comments. The results suggest that mimetics provides a lived and dynamic process through which children can practice self-actualising (Maslow 1943) and developing capabilities (Terzi 2005; Nussbaum and Sen 1993). The communal context of mimetics appears to be significant in providing the culture and environment for previously unrecognised capabilities to become recognised and develop. Such results suggest that mimetics does indeed have potential to enable an application of capability theory: promoting a practice and mind set in the adults and children alike with which recognises the multiple roles which children with learning disabilities can play. If social policy makers were to pursue Terzi’s invitation, mimetics has the potential to provide an example of the kinds of practice through which such policy ambitions could be realised.

For Robert, mimetics has enabled him to refuse a type-cast label of autism and instead to propose to himself and the others around him that there are multiple versions of Robert. He is one child, but through the communal context of mimetics his significance as a role model to peers is being realised. Robert’s peers look to him for possibilities of what they might be.

Through sustained experience of mimetics, support and recognition for what such practice can do, Robert and other children with learning disabilities might continue to develop their capabilities. Their multiple roles might enrich a more diverse society as

they move from the protection of schooling into a more vulnerable place in wider society.

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